Research article

Sixth graders in Israel recount their experience of verbal abuse by teachers in the classroom

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A B S T R A C T

Aim: This study adopts a children’s rights perspective stated in Articles 3, 12, 19, 28 of the Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) with the goal of listening to Israeli children articulate their experience of verbal abuse by teachers in 6th grade classrooms.

Methods: A purposeful sample of sixty students was individually interviewed and content analysis was performed following Strauss’ (1987) constant comparative method.

Results: Students reported teachers' yelling, name-calling and put-downs when failing to pay attention, complete their work, or obtain good grades. They condemned teachers as particularly hurtful and cruel for publically humiliating them in class. However, awareness of teachers' authority and fear of reprisal led to students' silence and reluctance to report the abuse to their parents or principal. Covert opposition was nevertheless exhibited as students engaged in a silent monologue telling teachers they had no right to mistreat them (females), silently cursing (males) and/or withdrawing participation (both genders). Repeated public humiliation and scapegoating resulted in the loss of interest in teacher's opinion and school and on rare occasions to the direct verbal confrontation or acting-out behaviour of the abused student.

Conclusion: This study stresses the importance of gaining insight into the world of children by having them articulate their experience and denounce any form of abuse by teachers in the classroom. A child-safe school culture that listen to children's view and make them feel safe when reporting any form of abuse in the classroom are preconditions to serving children’s best interests and wellbeing in schools.

This qualitative study adopts a children rights perspective (Articles, 3, 12, 19, 28) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC (1989) with the goal of listening to Israeli elementary school children convey their experiences of verbal abuse by teachers in 6th grade classrooms. Article 3 of UNCRC states as its primary goal the protection of children's best interests. To that effect, Article 12 establishes the right of children to form, and express their view and be listened to in all matters affecting their life and Article 19 demands the protection of children from physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect by any person responsible for the child’s safety and care. Article 28 establishes children’s right to education and the imperative that school discipline be administered in a manner that is consistent with the child’s right for respect and dignity. Article 29 states that the goal of education is the development of a child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and preparation of the child for a responsible life respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in a free society.

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Several Children Protection Acts (1993), Children Act (2004), United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Children (UNCRC, 2009, 2013), Dignity in Schools Campaign (MCED, 2013) and Child Participation Initiatives (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014) have recommended a human rights framework in education to ensure that children’s rights will not be left at the door of the school in the 196 countries that have ratified the convention (UNCRC, update 2016). These guidelines call for a child-safe school culture that respect children’s dignity, protect them from degrading and punitive discipline practices, and provide them with a framework in which they may be listened to when denouncing such practices with specific procedures to appeal suspension or expulsion (MCED, 2013; UNCRC, 2013).

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2009) acknowledges the belief espoused by most societies that adults, responsible of the care and education of children, are in the best position to protect the best interests of the children under their care. The UNCRC (2009, paragraphs 70–7) also emphasizes the close relationship between Article 3, 12 and 19, namely, that adults will be in the best position to serve those interests only when they enable the children under their care to express their views in accordance with their age and maturity (Article 12). By extension, within a school framework, only when children are encouraged to articulate their experience at school and listened to when exposing the violations of their rights to be treated with respect and dignity and protected from all forms of abuse in the classroom that children’s best interests will be served (Brassard and Fiorvanti, 2014; Lansdown et al., 2014).

The evaluation of Children Participation Initiatives implemented in developed and developing countries such as Ghana, Egypt, Nicaragua, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, provide evidence of their effectiveness in promoting children’s academic self-esteem, their well-being as students, their involvement in learning (Checkoway, 2011; Lansdown et al., 2014; Lansdown, 2011; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2006). Similarly, school-based abuse prevention initiatives such as Safe Me, Safe You and Stay Safe (Cullen, Lawlor, & MacIntyre, 1998; MacIntyre and Carr, 1999) in which students, teachers and parents participated in active roleplaying, participant and video modelling and discussions on issues related to physical and sexual abuse have been found effective in increasing students’ knowledge and protective behaviours (Brassard & Fiorvanti, 2014; MacIntyre, & Carr, 1999; MacMillan et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the programs so far implemented have failed to include guidelines for the prevention of emotional and verbal abuse and its devastating effects on the children’s well-being and development (Brassard & Fiorvanti, 2014; MacMillan et al., 2009).

In accordance with the internationally ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Child Safe Abuse Prevention programs and Participation Initiatives, this study views children as the important contributors to the decisions affecting their school life and in the best position to inform us about their experience of verbal abuse by teachers in the classroom. Within a classroom framework, teachers play a central role in students’ self-appraisal as they reflect through their attitudes, comments and evaluation their value and worth as students (Casarjian, 2000; Glaser, 2002; Kairys & Johnson, 2002; King & Janson, 2009; McEachern, Aluede, & Kenny, 2008; Twemlow & Fonagy, 2005). Based on this information, children who generally have few internal criteria of self-evaluation will judge their scholastic abilities, achievements and self-efficacy as learners (Akey, 2006; Bandura, 1997; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). It is therefore, incumbent on teachers to refrain from engaging in verbally abusive practices that erode or have the potential to erode students’ self-worth, and dignity and thereby, affect their well-being and growth (Casey, 2014; Casarjian, 2000; Glaser, 2002; Kairys & Johnson, 2002; King & Janson, 2009; McEachern et al., 2008; Twemlow & Fonagy, 2005). The terms verbal/emotional abuse/aggression by teachers are commonly used to refer to a continuous and repetitive pattern of negative behaviours toward a child who is under their care and protection. Among such behaviours are acts of commission such as spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting, or corrupting, and/or acts of omission such as failing to provide an emotionally safe environment, being unavailable and/or unresponsive to the students’ need for emotional support, and/or assistance with their work (CAN protection guidelines, 2015; Kairys & Johnson, 2002; MCED, 2013; Spectrum, 2006).

Research on verbal maltreatment/aggression by teachers in primary grades classroom has generally focused on schools located in African, Eastern, and Middle Eastern countries that continue to adopt as legitimate beating and humiliating disciplinary practices. In studies conducted in Botswana (Osei-Hwedie & Hobona, 2001), Zimbabwe (Shumba, 2001, 2002), Asia (Maki & Kitano, 2002), and the Middle East (Yousuf, Attia, & Kamel, 1998) the majority of the teachers surveyed reported using public shaming and humiliation to manage their classroom and enforce discipline. In Western countries the topic verbal/emotional abuse has received little research attention based on the erroneous assumption that since physical punishment has been banned from schools, children are now protected from cruel disciplinary practices (McEachern et al., 2008; White & Flynt, 2000).

The topic of teacher verbal abuse/maltreatment has nevertheless been indirectly addressed in research examining the impact of poor quality teacher-student relationships as perceived by parents and teachers on the cognitive and social-emotional development of children throughout elementary school grades (Brendgen, Wanner, Vitaro, Bukowski, & Tremblay, 2007; Casarjian, 2000). In both studies, the rate of children experiencing a poor relationship with teachers was reported to be 15 percent with males being more likely than females to experience such a relationship despite the lack of significant differences between genders in attention problems, school achievements, and acting out behaviours (Brendgen et al., 2007; Casarjian, 2000). A poor teacher–children relationship was found to be the main predictor throughout elementary school grades of the reduction in students’ positive work habits (Brendgen et al., 2007) motivation to learn, remain on task, and/or complete school assignments (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; McEachern et al., 2008; Maldonado-Carren & Votrubac-Dral, 2011; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003).

Research on classroom interactional justice indicated the centrality of teachers as powerful norm senders and models of fairness. Teachers who were perceived by students as fair and respectful of their feelings were found to promote a
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